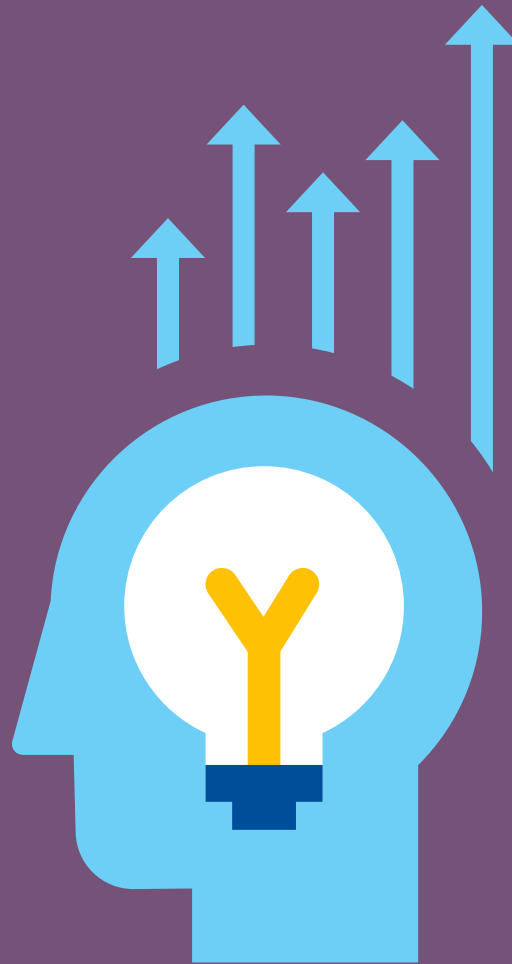


# THE BUSINESS OF BEING (MORE) HUMAN:

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CRITICAL HUMAN-CENTRIC SKILLS OF THE  
FUTURE AND HOW TO BUILD THEM

A WHITE PAPER FROM THE PERSONAL AND  
APPLIED LEADERSHIP CENTRE AT GIBS



**Gordon Institute  
of Business Science**

University of Pretoria

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# Abstract

In an increasingly complex, digital, and connected world, where everything is changing at pace, it is critical to leverage qualities associated with our unique human minds to create a desired future. Yet, global education systems, organisational training, and leadership streams have often neglected skills deemed human-focused, human-centric, and human-centred. These skills put the human experience first; require human creativity, interventions, and innovations; and prize emotion as well as logic, purpose, values and meaning as well as technical proficiency. Getting this mix right marks the next evolution of human leadership and workplace harmony, productivity, and relevance – a critical interplay of skills that human beings will require if they hope to remain competitive in the workplace of the future.

This requires development at the human being level, the ability to activate changes in mindset and behaviour, as well as in processes, strategies, and organisational structures. Developmental activities that can serve as a bridge between our current reality and an increasingly agentic and human-centric future are becoming critical. This is why the chief executive officers (CEOs) of some of the most successful and largest companies in the world rely on input from executive coaches.

What these companies know and what businesses around the world have come to appreciate even more since the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, is that enabling human-centric capacities will increasingly be the differentiator of the future as workspaces and interactions evolve. As the likes of the World Economic Forum (WEF), Deloitte, McKinsey & Company, PwC, and Accenture have outlined in numerous reports and research papers, the majority of these critical human skills will require agency, flexibility, creative thinking, empathy, self-awareness, and the wherewithal to empower productivity and performance in others.

While intellectual and general principles on how to develop these skills are more readily available in our information-saturated world, access to knowledge is also not enough. These capacities are individually unique and a personalised or experience/ process-based approach is often needed to guide the transformation around how people work and interact in a relevant, empathetic and context-driven way. Amongst others, professional coaching is one of the processes focused on facilitating thinking, self-discovery, personal development and mastery.

By optimising and leveraging the best of humankind's extraordinary capacities, we can help individuals and businesses scale and embed the skills needed for tomorrow.

## Keywords

Skills of the future

Personal development

Professional coaching

Future of work

Digital disruption

Relevance

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# Old thinking versus new ways of working

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In mid-2021, amidst higher coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccination numbers in the global north and a seeming decline in COVID-19 cases, the business world started asking: When can we go back to the office? (Liu, 2021). Subsequently, the likes of Google, Apple, Twitter, and Facebook pushed back their return-to-office plans due to rising cases. This was not before 49% of employees polled by McKinsey (Coe et al., 2021) anticipated negative impacts of returning to physical workplace, including safety concerns, a loss of work flexibility, and mental health challenges.

Contrastingly, while some managers were comfortable with remote teams, many more were eager to get back to a structured workspace. In some cases, the rationale included supporting collaboration and creativity, as well as being better able to support struggling teams and workers (Savage, 2021). However, other observers felt this push had more to do with the inadequacies that remote work had exposed in the way managers operated and the lack of trust (Parker et al., 2020) they had in the employees working under them. Media relations expert Ed Zitron (2021) interpreted the stand-off as follows:

Remote work ultimately disproves the notion that anyone can be a manager. Management is tough, managing people is tough, motivating people is tough. It is really difficult to get the best out of someone, to find what they're good at within an organization and then give them the means and motivation to thrive.

As Parker et al. (2020) stated:

COVID-19 has thrust many leaders into remote management which requires a different skill set than face-to-face management. They have been forced to make this transition quickly, and for the most part, without training.... As a result, some managers may be finding their roles more difficult than before – and making their subordinates' lives more stressful as they struggle to adapt.

These shifts to remote working, the requirements to connect effectively with diverse groups of people through virtual means, less structured and more flexible work environments, and the hard work of managing by trust over distance are not new. These trends have been visibly emerging for some time, but there is no doubt that the pandemic accelerated some shifts and showed up others more strongly. Certainly, it has heralded a clear invitation to use human-centric approaches to manage, lead, and develop the skills needed to navigate not only a post-COVID-19 world, but the very future of work.

These approaches require more than just an acknowledgement of the changes taking place globally, from technological advances to changing workplace design, the role of learning, the responsibilities of leaders, and the profound changes in how we connect with others. Moreover, it requires us to dig deeper into the very structure of our training and learning systems. For this, we need to know where we have come from and where we are going.

# COVID-19: Fast-tracking the future



The COVID-19 pandemic, with its work-from-home reality, digital-infused solutions, and heightened need for human and social interactions (Baym et al., 2021), gave rise to major shifts across society and business. The pandemic changed the way people work and highlighted the value of human-centric skills to maintain cohesion and motivation through digital means and in spite of physical distance. The outbreak held a magnifying glass on the all-important role of trust, and the equally important values of diversity and inclusion, in enabling human beings to work together effectively in a purpose-fuelled way. While COVID-19 has shown the value, cost-saving, and efficiency of remote digital working solutions, it has also exposed challenges when it comes to how staff are onboarded, transitioned, and enabled in a digital workplace; how training is carried out; and how networking is performed.

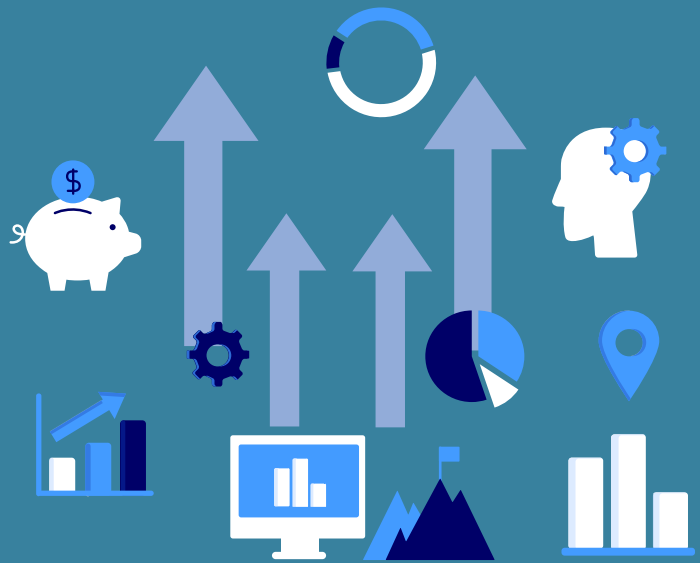
For many employees, this transition has been challenging. While 61% of leaders surveyed as part of a Microsoft (2021, p. 6) report said they were “thriving” in this new world of work, “Gen Z [born 1997–2012], women, frontline workers, and those new to their careers, reported struggling the most over the past year. And workers feel the disconnect.” Workers reported being exhausted, siloed, battling work-life imbalances, finding their professional networks diminishing (Microsoft, 2021) and, as a result, their future opportunities, too. While work-life balance, resilience, stress management, and mental well-being were certainly topical pre-COVID-19, the unique pressures placed on workers have meant that these issues have further erupted into

our consciousness, demanding more attention from workers and workplaces alike.

To counter these feelings of disconnection and confusion, Thuli Segalo, a professional associate at GIBS and organisational effectiveness specialist at Better Me Business Coaching, believes businesses should actively focus on building trust. She noted that this can be achieved by partnering with and enabling people and entrusting managers at all levels with information from strategic plans to employee output and mental wellness, which they might previously not have been privy to and which, in the past, required them to lead without fully knowing. Segalo stated this will lead to greater levels of collaboration and openness:

Leaders have become more consultative, not at the expense of stalling a decision, but to give people a space to be heard – even if the outcome doesn’t favour them. That is definitely a big outcome of COVID. The future world of work will, hopefully, move forward with that recognition and with transparency and truthfulness. Previously there were things that were only known to leadership, but COVID pushed these things beyond closed doors; even if you don’t know what the outcome will be.

However, there are other trends, over and above COVID-19, shaping the world of leadership and the very future of our workspace and working environments. These shifts were in play before the pandemic.



# Understanding the mega trends

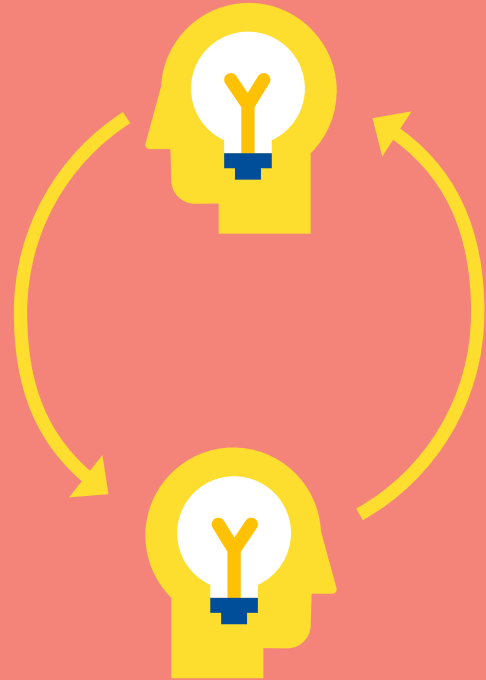
COVID-19, together with the ongoing impacts of a Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) world driven by technological progress (Schwab, 2016), have exposed the frailties and foibles of our old normal. Among the megatrends reshaping how companies operate are the skills and business strategies required to keep pace with rapid change and significant technological advances. While many of these changes have the potential to increase productivity and longevity, they may also impact the relevance of certain jobs in the future. Demographic shifts, such as ageing populations, longer life spans, and the gravitation of people away from rural areas and into cities, are impacting supply chains and skills availability. The impact of climate change and the growing consumer-driven demand for more sustainable business practices is an evolving megatrend, which is playing out against a growing demand for resources (Brown et al., 2018; Sneader & Singhal, 2021). Notably, the widening gulf between rich and poor countries and growing global inequality is fuelling anger among citizens and causing increased political and social unrest (Varral, 2021).

Given these profound changes, it is impossible for companies and individuals to continue on the same paths as before. This reality was starkly evident before the 2020 pandemic and has been accelerated due to the COVID-19 outbreak and the associated lockdowns. Today, adaptation is no longer a “nice-to-have”, it is an essential aspect of individual and corporate survival. As co-author, futurist, global strategist and full-time GIBS faculty member Abdullah Verachia (2020) explained:

We need to reimagine the new world and how it looks and feels. We need to become comfortable with the shifts to appreciate how a hybrid reality might look and feel, and what it means for us individually, as well as for businesses, societies and countries.

This imagining, comfort, sense of meaning, and the resultant agency to act are inherently internal personal qualities. This means taking a focused view of how the internal world and capacities of human beings impact the future world of work as well as how in-demand skills will inevitably change. The enabling and development of these skills will also need to change.

# The coders versus the de-coders



In 2020, the WEF's future of jobs survey continued with its theme of anticipating how the advance of technology and automation would spur on demand for skills, such as analytical thinking and innovation, complex problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, leadership, emotional intelligence (EQ) as well as the use, monitoring, control, design and programming of technology. In light of COVID-19, McKinsey (Lund et al., 2021) added another layer to this evolution, highlighting the disruption likely to impact physical-proximity jobs, such as healthcare, education, leisure and travel, and personal care. These changes are likely to spur on increased human-technology interplay in areas, including telemedicine, greater automation in call centres, and manufacturing (Lund et al., 2021).

Research shows that more than 100 million workers across eight countries assessed will need to find a new occupation by 2030 (Lund et al., 2021). This begs the questions: What skills will be required in this new world of work? How do companies develop, manage, and retain these in-demand individuals? And how do individuals unlearn, adapt, and relearn?

There are clues to the future direction of work in the WEF's comprehensive list of essential skills, which highlights two main areas of future demand: 1) the specialist ability to deliver in-demand technological solutions; and 2) the human skills of self-awareness, self regulation, effective interaction and complex problem-solving. Rather than one dominating the other, an interplay between human capabilities and digital solutions is looking increasingly likely.

"So-called soft skills are likely to be a hard currency of the future," explained Alison Reid, head of the Personal and Applied Leadership unit at GIBS. "Qualities including the capacity for self-discovery and for self-directed learning, to connect and influence, as well as empathy, communication and compassion will be critical in the job market of the future." Other internal capacities, such as adaptation, managing change, and harnessing diverse and flexible forms of thinking (from wildly creative to focussed analytical), are equally important. Lastly, the ability to actively enable others to develop these capacities may well be the differentiating leadership skill of the future.

Nobel Prize-winning economist Herbert Simon (as cited in Davenport & Beck, 2001) once observed that "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention". The knowledge era has opened the door to unprecedented access to knowledge. The challenge is no longer as much access to information, as it is to seek, curate, filter, and use information intentionally and smartly. Now the human mind's potential to navigate its own limitations, harness its own strengths, and intelligently direct attention towards achieving a preferable outcome in a given situation will be increasingly important.

Knowing is no longer enough. It's the filtering, the quality of intentional focusing on what matters in one's context, the cultivating of creative insight, and the applying of knowledge in purposeful action that is so critical. This is also how we build our internal capacity for ongoing change.



# A disrupted tomorrow

**The global coaching industry was worth more than US\$15 billion in 2019 and was expected to grow to US\$20 billion by 2020 (Clark, 2021). It is possible that this is a powerful indicator of the need to augment technical skills and digital automation with individuals' capacities for insight, influence, creativity, and change.**

According to Segalo, in a disrupted tomorrow, connections must become more deliberate and intentional. For many, this will involve learning how to build a rapport across culturally diverse groups of people, often online, and often nurturing these relationships using digital means. This is not the only change facing workforces around the world. The rise of the gig economy must also be considered, alongside remote working, shifting workplace demographics, and the rise of global talent markets (Kane et al., 2016, 2017).

All these factors combine under the banner of the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) world. For global workforces, VUCA means an evolving reality that few leaders – if any – fully understand how to navigate and where, in the face of insufficient or incomplete information, many leaders are suffering from decision paralysis (Ramakrishnan, 2021).

Verachia noted that in a disrupted VUCA world, the role of strategic foresight and scenario planning will be imperative, as will diversity within the workforce. The ability of a company and its people to respond to new and relevant information becomes vital. This absorptive capacity will require both supportive organisational cultures and learning interventions, as well as leadership that supports innovation (Naqshbandi & Tabche, 2018).

Unfortunately, as per Verachia, many leaders struggle to step outside their comfort zone – they are stuck in a reactive, firefighting mode and battle to think about the next step. They struggle to show vulnerability and lack an understanding of the world beyond the company or geography in which they operate. They also do not take the time to think and examine the future. In part, this may be because internal capacities, including vulnerability, resilience, shifting perspective out of one's comfort zone, and EQ, were likely not emphasised/taught at school. Leaders often are not supported in navigating their own biases: hardwired limitations as well as their immense adaptive possibility. Neuroscience describes in functional terms how the brain is wired for familiarity, comfort, status quo, and fast (energy-efficient) reactive thinking. Challenging these assumptions (especially about one's self-identity) requires a capacity for self-awareness that is not necessarily developed in childhood.

Adaptive capacity and courage to challenge one's engrained mental habits requires practice, resilience, and reflection. It is driven by empathy, humility, curiosity, and a desire to make sense of the world outside of your existing beliefs and world views; traits that are often labelled as human-centred in nature because they leverage off human abilities that are (as yet) not replicable by machines and technology. The good news is that if leaders are developed for self-insight, capacity for agency, creativity, and change, they can learn to observe the assumptions in their own thinking habits, shift their internal coding, and make better choices, despite a flurry of disruptions. In this way, leaders can expand their influence from coders to de-coders and even re-coders for themselves and for those they lead.



# The people differentiator

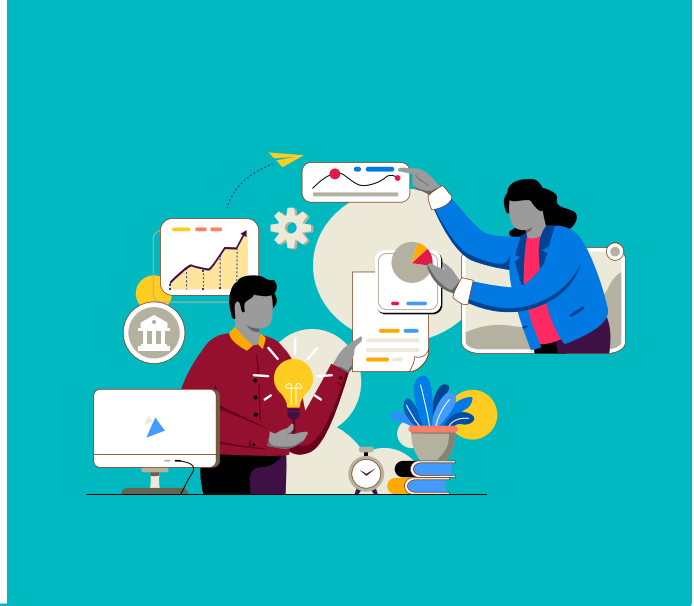
How leaders manage and connect with their team members and the openness companies display when it comes to incorporating technological advances to better support people in their work and personal capacities are currently a driving force shaping the future world of work. However, some leaders and businesses are studiously avoiding the signs, failing to adapt as the fight for human talent accelerates (Kelly, 2021).

In 2021, McKinsey (De Smet et al., 2021) released research into what it termed the “great attrition”, a trend emerging in the United States that has seen more than 15 million workers quitting their jobs since April 2021 and with 40% of employees polled saying it was “somewhat likely” that they would leave their current jobs in the next three to six months. The United States is not alone, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Ireland are also tracking this trend amidst the push for higher salaries, greater flexibility, and increased recognition (Workhuman, 2021). These findings should also be considered in the context of fewer promotions being given during the COVID-19 pandemic and less training being carried out, which traditionally are both levers used by companies to attract and retain prized skills (Greedy, 2021).

According to global consulting firm Accenture (Smith et al., 2021), 63% of high-growth companies have already adopted a “productivity anywhere” workforce model, compared with 69% of negative or no-growth companies, which continue to focus on on-site work. With business growth linked to developing a resilient and productive workforce, it is critical to heed the warning signs when it comes to talent attraction and retention.

Of the 9 000 workers surveyed in the Accenture study (Smith et al., 2021), 83% favoured a hybrid working model. In addition, 85% of the individuals who felt they could be productive anywhere were intending to remain with their current company for a long period (Smith et al., 2021). Therefore, a clear link exists between future growth and how companies manage their talent pool, and how this is achieved relies on effective and relevant leadership. As one respondent told Accenture (Smith et al., 2021): “I can be productive anywhere when my organisation’s leaders display active listening and care and consideration for the well-being, productivity and personal development of workers.” Getting this mix right will require adapting workforce policies and leadership approaches to cater for a new reality, while still paying attention to developing talent potential using both human and digital means, and supporting ways in which to ensure productivity.

# Human skills in a changing world



Since workplaces and workforces will inevitably change, and indeed many already have, it is a foregone conclusion that leadership skills and approaches must also adapt. Early indications are that managers and leaders will have to tread the line between operational efficiency and human-centricity. Words and phrases like flexibility, agility, empathy, mindfulness, collaboration (Joy, 2021), slow and fast thinking, solving complex and ambiguous problems creatively, learning how to learn fast, and effectively leveraging the input of others were raised by the GIBS experts consulted during the writing of this white paper.

For instance, Segalo concentrated on the need to collaborate and the ability to have better, more meaningful conversations. She also noted that an affinity with working in a virtual space and being able to display empathy in this digital environment would prove to be a game changer for many leaders.

Brad Shorkend, GIBS faculty and CEO of relevance advisory Still Human, focused on how leaders must work to create a switched-on and engaged workforce by bringing all their EQ abilities to the fore. They should consider and contemplate the people aspect of the business strategy and obsessively shift the discussion to the human experience. Collaboration between leaders throughout an organisation should ideally ensure that positive behaviours and approaches are replicated, creating a ripple effect that supports the values of the organisation. Similarly, Shorkend stressed that accountability and consequences for bad behaviour on the part of leaders and executives should also be guaranteed.

For Verachia, great leaders will be those capable of understanding the world beyond their limited lived experiences and able to tap into a deeper sense of empathy and awareness. He reinforced the WEF's view around curiosity and creativity, making a case for leaders with a heightened sense of curiosity, imagination, problem-solving ability, and ideation. Most notably, he said leaders must be given the space and support to reflect and make sense of the changes around them:

I think senior leaders in companies have really grappled with the lack of boundaries. Many I've been speaking to are struggling because they have no time to think, they can't synthesise and evaluate in the car or while walking to the next meeting [like they used to], it's one [meeting] after another. Zoom fatigue is real, alongside having to attend up to 10 meetings a day. And, because companies are overwhelmed, they are putting pressure on senior executives.

If organisations pay attention to the struggles being faced by leaders (Magwegwe, 2021), and acknowledge the vulnerability and uncertainty they are feeling by creating supportive platforms for them to engage openly and freely, then leaders will be better equipped to guide their own people and teams through the changes that lie ahead. With the right learning and development, Verachia explains that leaders can help workers to adjust to the future by providing the following support:

- Giving employees the opportunity to expand their view beyond the environment;
- Helping employees to acquire new skills;
- Showing how to step off the performance zone and into the learning zone;
- Demonstrating how to put clients at the centre by developing a keen understanding of all the different segments and their needs;
- Leading the way by showing a genuine appreciation for inclusion and access;
- Advocating for more experiential and more sensory learning; and
- Offering mentorship, coaching and opening the door for employees to speak with people outside the organisation.

In his book, *Work disrupted: Opportunity, resilience, and growth in the accelerated future of work*, the founding partner of Deloitte's Future of Work practice, Jeff Schwartz, devoted several chapters to understanding how managers, CEOs, and executives will need to learn what it means to manage the 21st century workforce, how companies are moving from hierarchies to networks of teams, and how management must evolve away from a supervisory and compliance activity (Schwartz, 2020). As Schwartz put it:

The role for managers and leaders at every level is to co-design and to work with workers to really coach and team and to fuel their performance. There was a big discussion in the last year or two about what is going to happen to middle managers, and I think middle managers are going to become player coaches. They are going to become the people who are on the field, working with their teams every day to improve their performance. We need to design work with our teams, not just manage work. I think we need to design the future as much as we need to manage it. And we need to recognise that in a VUCA world ... sensing, experimenting, inspiring is really important. So the shifts that need to go on at the individual worker level and the managerial level is just some of the big work, along with developing some of the new technologies to work in some of these new ways. (Deloitte US, 2021)

# Developing future human-centred skills



For too long the world has relied on Industrial Revolution-era methods and a conveyor-belt approach to education – be it at school or higher-education levels. This traditional model focused on intelligence, memory and standardisation to the detriment of EQ, resilience, innovation, creativity, and adaptability (Krishnan, 2020). The system emphasised rote learning of historical and general information for application in relatively routine and standard ways. However, the world as we know it today is anything but slow, routine, and uniform, and we now also know how much of human action is shaped by emotionally driven values and not always logic. Consequently, a fresh approach to developing new capabilities is essential in the future world of work, as asserted by Reid:

Now, the competitive advantage they offer and their relative lack of early development has become a pain point for organisations, which are now trying to fill in the gaps.

Unfortunately, many companies are going about this the wrong way. They are approaching nuanced human skills with the same methods they might use to teach maths or accounting, hoping that with the right instructions, individuals can download enigmatic traits, such as empathy, and neatly tick the box. Certainly, these skills must be taught, but this learning approach is insufficient if the flexible, contextual, and authentic embedding of these abilities is the end goal.

Historically, an awareness of the internal and personal driving forces behind behaviour – such as emotions, values and meaning – have not been well understood and even now are not widely taught in schools and universities. Yet, they fuel and shape what we do. Instead, logical or rational ways of thinking have been favoured. However, we now know that the human brain is largely not rational (even when we think we are). Powerful and entrenched mental bias is in operation daily, convincing each of us that our way of thinking is the only way, the right way. For example, the Bayesian principle reminds us that while we often assume that we assess new information against the merits of that information, in fact the human brain assesses all new information against the “fit” with the old (engrained thinking). This bias creates attentional blindness that is self-reinforcing and, for the most part, we are unaware of it.

Unravelling these mental habits starts with reflection and courageous insight, and requires the most basic, but scarce

resource: time to really (and reflectively) think. Raised awareness about the internal mechanisms that drive human insight and behaviour as well as tools to direct them is no longer a nice-to-have option.

Right now, the pressure is on leaders and managers to find ways to leverage the power of their minds by, among other things, creating time to think, learning how to challenge existing thinking, and developing the capacity to undertake creative reflection. Unfortunately, many simply do not know how. These leaders benefit from interventions, such as mentoring and coaching, as well as being paired with colleagues to collaborate and share and with external experts to help navigate new realities.

The importance of combining “inside-out” development for leaders with “outside-in” development is now accepted as a powerful combination. To escape the echo chamber created by hardwiring and bias, we can greatly benefit from another independent, but skilled, mind working with us, enabling agency-fuelled thinking through strategic questioning (that shifts the mental rut). Over time, a discover-unlearn-relearn process can not only achieve targeted goals, but also serve to expand identity and increase internal capacities, including the capacity for intentional change.

One effective way of doing this is through professional coaching and scaling personal change through manager coaching, peer-to-peer coaching, and embedded coaching cultures. Therefore, effective coaching is an avenue for understanding not only the evolution of the leadership role, but the ways in which leaders need to develop and connect with their own staff members (Stevens & Reid, 2020). Engaging vulnerably and bravely with the vast potential and limitations of their minds allows leaders and managers to authentically enable their employees to do the same.

It requires leaders to develop a much deeper empathy for what employees are going through and to pair that empathy with the compassion – and determination – to act and change. Only then can employers properly re-examine the wants and needs of their employees – together with those employees – and begin to provide the flexibility, connectivity, and sense of unity and purpose that people crave.



# Coaching as a leadership developmental activity

Along the way, many senior executives will be challenged to reimagine how they lead. The skills that made leaders effective before the COVID-19 pandemic – strong coaching, mentoring, creating strong teams – are just table stakes for the challenge of the months and years ahead. (De Smet et al., 2021)

According to Reid, “Coaching has the potential to close the gap between strategic thinking at a corporate level, and strategic thinking in the leadership sphere, personal strategic thinking, if you will.” Verachia indicated that coaching interventions achieve this by empowering leaders to:

- Be vulnerable in a space where they are not expected to have all the answers;
- Share and get a different perspective from someone who is not there to judge performance;
- Get an honest view in a space of safety;
- Step away and get a different view of the world;
- Develop a tool box to support both management and thinking; and
- Achieve greater balance by focusing time and attention on achieving personal goals.

Development programmes need to train literacies like emotional, cultural, and relational literacies that will help to unlock human capacities. Coaching augments this approach with personalised development – a combination that, particularly in the area of leadership development, is powerful.

Coaching is described as a collaborative, client-centred process that is built around a trusted thinking relationship to generate new perspectives. It is based on deeply developed skills of listening, questioning, supporting, and challenging in the holistic context of an individual’s personal and work life. This process facilitates thinking and reflection around decision-making, actions taken, and life-long learning, with the ultimate goal of helping the individual to achieve both personal and organisational goals (Van der Veen et al., 2020). This approach is often applied in executive leadership development, when a coach is able to help leaders develop new ways of thinking, analyse and understand their leadership style, and develop deeper insights into navigating change, people skills, interpersonal skills, the ability to make sense of shifting paradigms, and apply critical-thinking skills to galvanise and motivate employees. It’s a powerful approach to support a leader in better leveraging their capabilities in support of the outcomes that matter (hence the link to strategic thinking).

“It’s the simple stuff that is so hard,” Segalo said, relating how a senior coaching client was confronted by an appraisal that could not fault her execution, but raised notable concerns about her tendency to trample over others. Segalo explained how, in the course of their executive coaching sessions:

The CEO in question realised she couldn’t keep going on her own and that while the technical stuff was easy and achievable, she lagged behind when it came to people. For this leader, it was important to become aware of her impact on others and help her develop a heightened sense of empathy.

Senior leaders often work closely with a highly experienced professional coach to not only develop expanded levels of self-awareness and flexibility of thinking in pursuits of meaningful goals, but also an ability to enable this for others. The true impact of coaching in enabling the critical skills of the future lies in scaling it, creating a groundswell of peer-to-peer and manager-to-employee coaching skill.

As Jefferson Yu-Jen Chen, a full-time GIBS faculty member and chief innovation coach at Forward Notion, explained: “Developing a thinking society means developing leaders who think.” This remains one of the most critical reasons why companies reach out to coaching and personal development experts is to help them develop leaders.

Head of technical learning at Anglo American, Desray Shuck, believes that this need will define how coaching continues to be used within an organisation. While Shuck maintains that as an employee value proposition everyone could have access to coaching, she asserted that individuals should take responsibility for their own learning journey to remain relevant in the future and develop the skills required in a 4IR world.

“That support can come through expert coaching or peer-coaching groups,” says Shuck. Adding:

What we are trying to do in the organisation [Anglo American] is to develop coaching skill as an intricate part of leadership skill. That has to lead to a place where we are having a conversation and you end up asking some good coaching questions, because you are good at coaching, but without always requiring it to be formalised.

This evolution would mark the unleashing of coaching to better deliver the competitive human skills of the future.



# The future of leader development and coaching

In addition to the development of personal and interpersonal competencies among leaders and managers, there are other factors that may change the face of coaching and personal development in the future, including the role of digital disruption. According to the International Coaching Federation, three of the major trends shaping the future of coaching focus on demand, offering niche services to targeted sectors and age groups, and ensuring that coaches have the right qualifications for the job (Willis, 2021). What is missing from this list is a nod to the potentially game-changing impact of technology on the world of coaching.



For Chen, the future of coaching could incorporate the use of robots, chatbots, and artificial intelligence (AI). There are already glimmers of how a future form of coaching might evolve, possibly shifting towards a model already being used in the sports and fitness industry to drive performance and commitment through automated feedback and by tracking data via heart-rate monitors and wearables (Couzens, 2021). Chen shared that through this approach, technology has the power to become a powerful assistant to help personal and business coaches to prompt clients to achieve certain behaviours, to pause and reflect on a process or keep goals, and promises front of mind.

Shuck has seen first-hand that people are more excited by mobile learning and e-learning methods, which are shorter, more gamified, and more accessible. Traditionally, a company like Anglo American worked on a face-to-face basis, flying employees around the world to engage in person, but this is shifting to a more balanced and blended approach where mobile and virtual instruction work hand-in-hand with in-person learning. In the future, she fully expects to see an increasingly regionalised approach and a future in which coaching plays out using an app that is tailored to each client's specific needs and each employee's status as part of the organisational talent pool.

Technology is not advanced enough to replace a human coach in the true sense of the "strategic and personal partnered thinking" role. However, in the future, an interlinked hybrid human-AI process may well become a tool in the arsenal of a professional coach, with tools like chatbots being used for check-ins and reviews, and for monitoring stress indicators, including blood pressure and heart rate. Moreover, AI's ubiquitous nature means that digital coaches will be available 24/7 via personal mobile devices with no need for factoring in human downtime. Whether that will prove an adequate replacement for having a person on the other end of the technology remains to be seen, but it is certainly possible for the more transactional elements of coaching to be filled by technology, Shuck explained.

Linda van der Loo, executive partner of learning innovation at Blue Pebble Consulting and EdCast Africa, admitted that "the coaching industry has been relatively slow to respond" to the

rise of digital, but stressed that the profession is by no means immune to the disruption impacting many corporate clients. Not only does the shift to virtual coaching and the use of digital platforms require coaches to consider how to build relationships and connections in a virtual world, but it also necessitates greater empathy on the part of the coach and a willingness to shift away from the usual hour-long sessions into a more flexible and fast-paced 20- or 30-minute "micro" meeting.

For Van der Loo, incorporating technology is just the opening gambit of this evolution. She also believes the field of professional coaching will increasingly turn towards specialisation – requiring coaches to become experts in their field and in their chosen sector to deliver the deep, sectoral value clients will require in the future.

Shorkend agreed that companies will become increasingly clear on what they need and want from a coach, and will cherry-pick from the different competencies inside the coaching space. Coaches and professionals committed to personal leader development will have to refine their offering in an increasingly complicated world. Reid built on this concept, saying: "In the future, a senior individual may need or want a whole leadership growth 'board of directors' – ranging from coaches, mentors, teachers, and significant trusted advisors in their network."

Chen believes we should aim for the democratisation of coaching:

I think the future will be even more unpredictable. The pace will be quite ferocious. Either keep up or you'll perish. Which means there will be more stress and, when there is more stress, leaders should know how to coach people as well as activate their best selves. Yes, leaders should be able to find coaches to activate their best selves, but my dream is ... in the future, that each and every one of us knows how to coach.

Certainly, the end goal should be scaling and embedding an authentic approach to enable one's and others' best human potential in such a way that it becomes a way of being and leadership that best positions organisations and communities for the future.

**While the exact form and nature of coaching in the future is still evolving, the GIBS experts are largely in accord when it comes to the critical skills that will be required of coaches in the future. These include but are not limited to:**

- Empathy and curiosity;
- Critical thinking and seeking to understand from the perspective of another;
- Expertise in processes of personal development and change;
- Creativity;
- Ability to connect the dots;
- Ability to hold and explore multiple perspectives;
- Storytelling skills;
- Capacity to suspend judgement;
- Openness to using data;
- Ability to connect to others and create trust and safety (to enable stretch);
- Skill at learning from people and teasing out another's thoughts; and
- Modelling the capacities to challenge their own thinking habits and create new possibilities.

# Conclusion

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Far from a technologically driven future in which human abilities are rendered redundant, global shifts have actually highlighted historically underrated human skills, such as the ability to listen, connect, observe, and perceive diverse people, trends, and emerging scenarios. It is increasingly clear that these skills will differentiate those with a future mindset from those for whom tomorrow is a stressful and challenging place. Preparing and moulding individuals for such a reality will require more than a traditional education curriculum has to offer, especially if the intention is to support emotional literacy, self-awareness, learning, and innovation, while fostering an ability to see future technological advances not as a threat, but as an opportunity.

It is the belief of futurist Gerd Leonhard (2020) that:

Anything that can be automated and digitised will be, you can trust that this is going to happen. But it doesn't make us useless. Some of our tasks, and some of our routines are becoming somewhat useless... what we have to do is move up the food chain while we are still here because anything that cannot be digitised or automated or robotised or virtualised becomes extremely valuable.

Certainly, we have to use and understand technology and, as human beings, we need the adaptability to shift in line with any future megatrends that impact the world. Nevertheless, this can only be achieved by leveraging our human-centric capacities for agency, change, self-reflection, compassion and creativity.

Unfortunately, very few organisations and learning institutions are currently placing sufficient emphasis on developing these skills. Few future leaders, workers, and citizens are taught empathy, creativity, cognitive flexibility or curiosity at school or university. While some business schools are touching on some of the "soft skills", often this is not with the hard emphasis needed (Reid et al., 2021), nor with a sufficient adoption of the new and creative blends of development modalities available.

In an increasingly digital world, leader-focused developmental activities like coaching remain human-friendly levers with which to facilitate reflective thinking and personal development practices for outcomes that matter; as well as enabling collaboration and development in those they lead. Using developmental approaches like coaching can help to equip leaders with expanded identities and enhanced capacities to adapt to a changing world of work by guiding them towards learning how to learn and unlocking ways to collaborate across generations of multicultural and diverse individuals. These abilities were heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many businesses got a glimpse of the 4IR world many have been talking about since 2015 (M&G Data Desk, 2019) and the changes it will bring.

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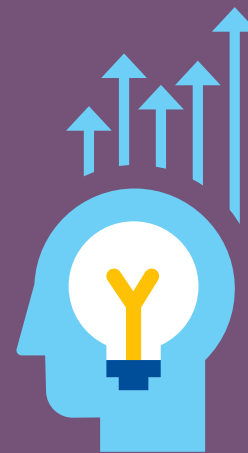
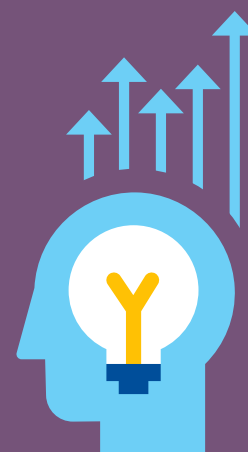
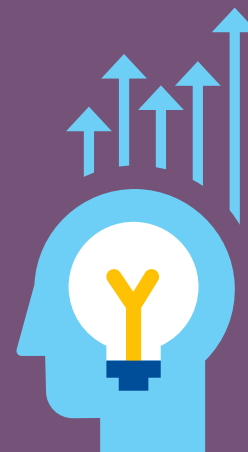
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